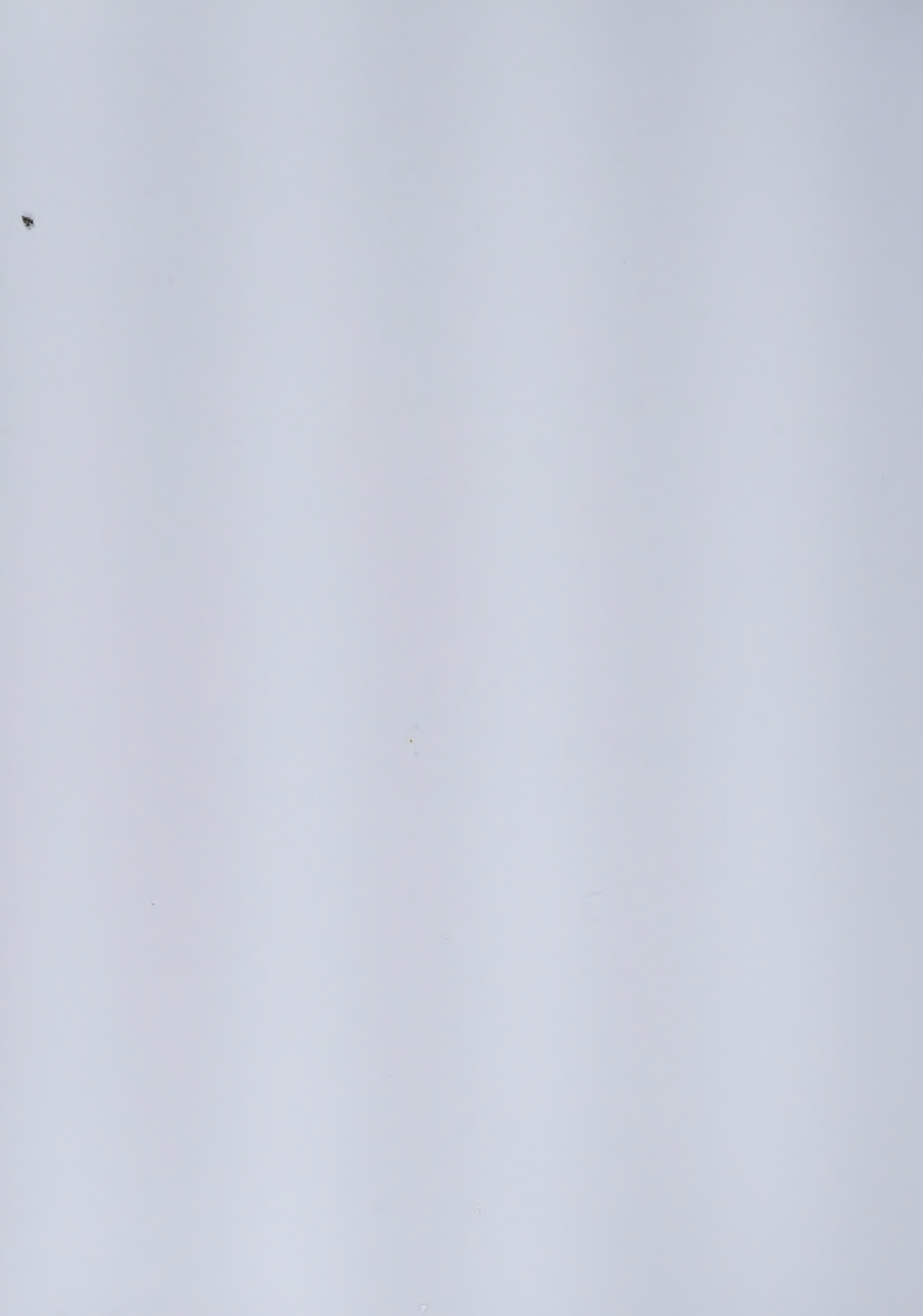


Adventure on Clee Island

Tanuka Bhaumik Endow

Illustrations
Amitava Sengupta





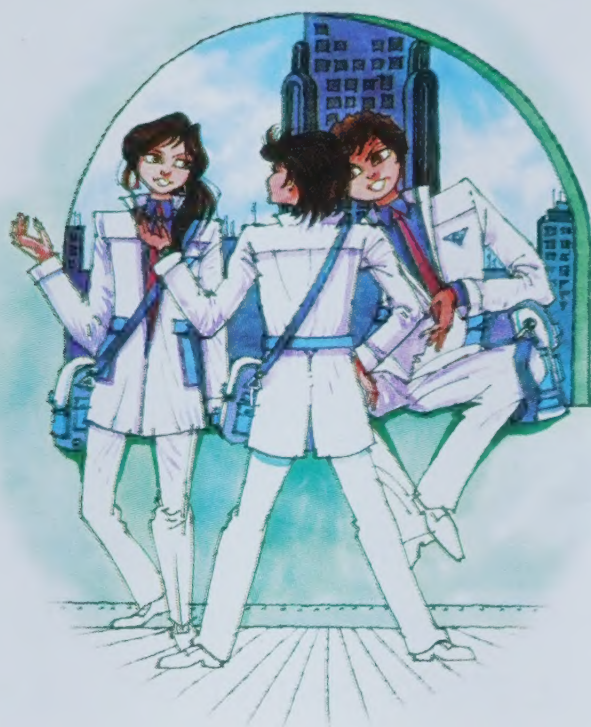
Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

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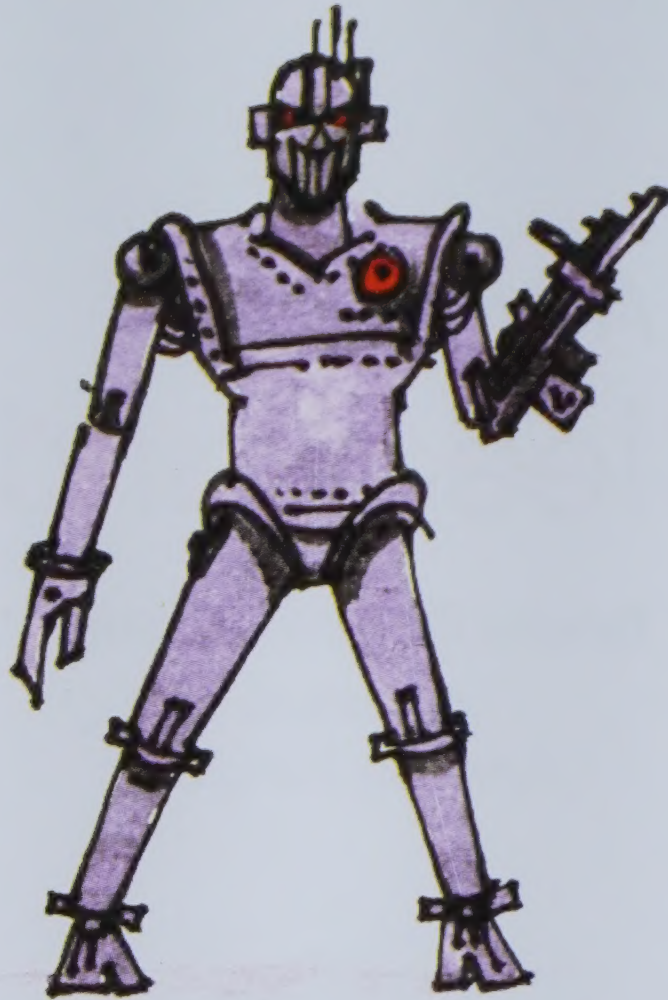
Amitava Sengupta



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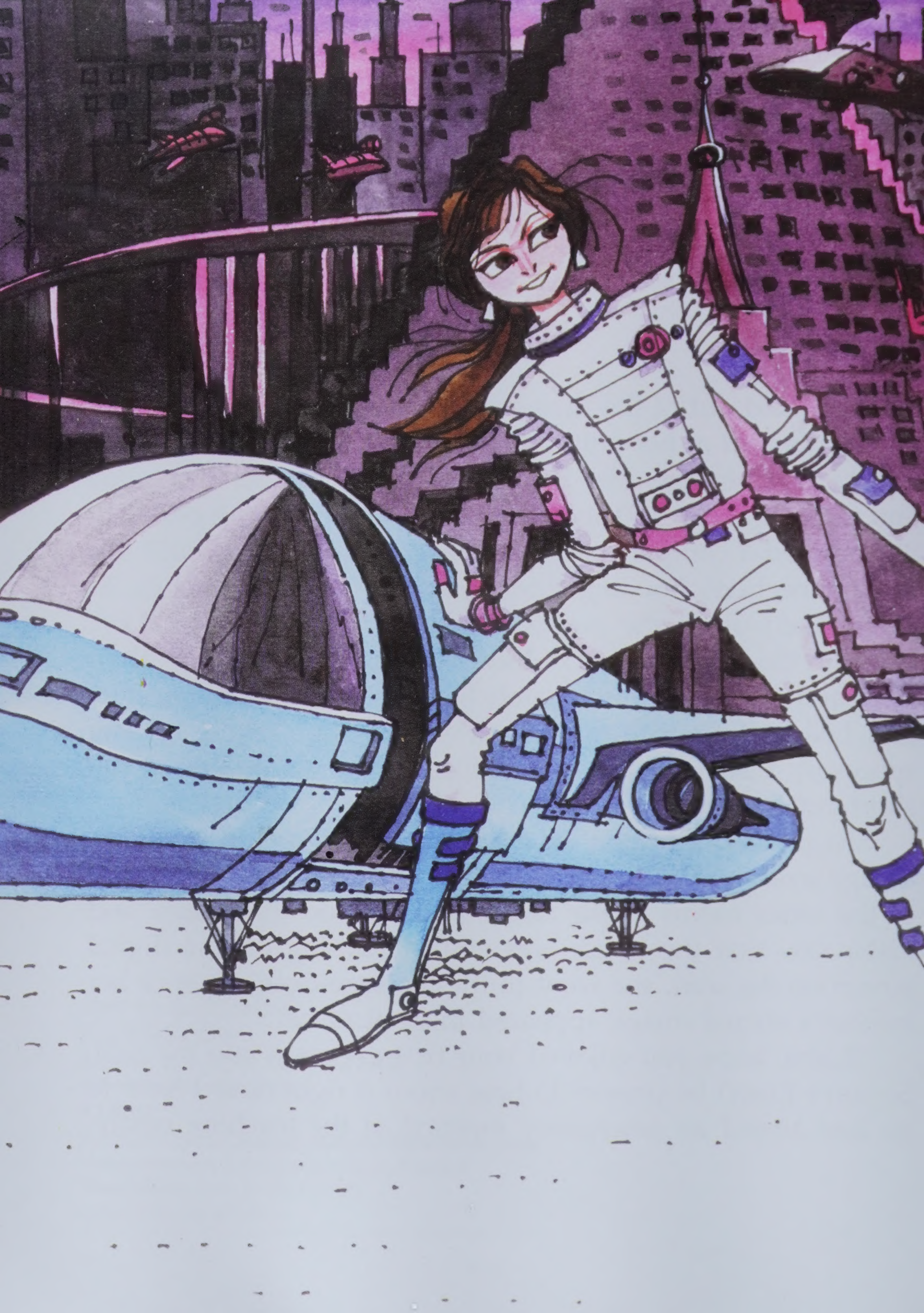


THE TRIP

Lisha walked out of the time-cell. Busy with her thoughts, she hardly glanced at her glittering surroundings. At fifteen, Lisha was tall for her age. Her black hair was caught in a ponytail and the silver spacesuit she wore fitted her slim figure perfectly. She entered a complex of condominiums, which was built like a giant beehive, housing thousands of small apartments. As she walked up to the doorway of her home and placed her palm on the doorframe, the doors slid open to let her in. Their circular living-room immediately lit up with a soft, orange glow and Lisha's favourite music started playing. Taking off her spacesuit, Lisha moved around the room, comfortable in her short cotton tunic.

She pressed a button on the wall and the wall turned into a huge screen as the digital wallpaper was activated. The images of the other rooms in the house came up on the screen, and Lisha saw that the house was empty. Turning off the digital screen on the wall, she went to the message-desk. At once her mother's virtual image appeared in front of her.

"Lisha, hope you enjoyed your first ever trip into the past. So sorry I can't be present to hear about it right now. I have to go and attend an emergency meeting at the teaching centre.





Please set the programme in the cooker and the cyber-chef will cook whatever you want. You can also take the vita-strip from the refrigerator. Please tell Neil to take proper food instead of just gobbling down a vita-strip."

Lisha laughed at her mother's message but was disappointed at the same time.

"Oh, well, I suppose expecting Ma to be around to hear my stories, was hoping for too much," she thought, as she flopped onto the floor of the living room. The room was furnished with a few low couches, and the floor was covered with a cool mat. On three sides of the room, the walls glowed with a soft light and the wall on the far side was almost entirely covered with a vivid seascape. A ship sailed atop a raging sea, caught in a storm. A few dark specks were visible over the crashing waves that dominated the painting.

Lisha got to her feet and slowly walked over to the big painting. She knew it to be an antique, painted long ago by some ancestor of one of her parents. Till now, she had never really taken note of it. But today she looked at the tiny specks dotting the sky and muttered to herself, "So, that's what they are! Birds! Back then, there must have been millions of them flying all over the earth."

Picking up a remote, Lisha pressed a tiny button and part of the wall opposite her slid sideways to give her a view of the outside world from behind a glass partition. A faint red glow that spread across the horizon showed that evening was approaching. But that sign from the setting sun could hardly be noticed because of the blazing lights all around. Metallic skyscrapers, bathed in bright lights, crowded the landscape. Small sleek aircrafts and some spaceships dotted the sky. It was the year 2070 and the earth was almost enveloped with roads, bridges, flyovers, spaceship and aircraft hangars and, of course, buildings of monstrous size.

The steadily growing army of population had spread into nooks and corners of the earth. Most of the planets in the galaxy had been found to be practically uninhabitable so that the earth had become overcrowded. Greenery was reduced to carefully preserved pockets in national parks and forest reserves. Only a small section of the earth's population had been relocated in the newly found planets—Meteor, Granada and RD-1.

Gazing at the harsh metallic glitter outside, Lisha was lost in thought, when suddenly the living-room doors slid open once again and her younger brother Neil strode into the room, bringing with him a burst of energy. Tall for his age, like his

sister, Neil had a round face that still had some puppy fat and right now it was lit up with a huge grin.

"Guess what! We won our match with Granada today! Our good old earth is still right there at the top!"

Lisha smiled at her brother's excitement. "That's great! But wait till you hear my news!"



"Oh, how was your big day today? How did you like the time-travel?"

There was more than a little envy in Neil's voice, since he, at thirteen, had to wait for two more years and pass quite a few tough fitness tests before he could be eligible for time-travel.

"It was wonderful, Neil! I was just waiting for you to come home so I could tell you all about it," Lisha said excitedly.

"So here I am. Just shoot."

"Well, first I had to report to the control tower from where the time-cell takes off. It's really sleek, something like a capsule. All blue fibre-glass shaped little like a bigger edition of the earlier nutrition capsules. Oh, by the way, Ma wants you to take your lunch and not just vita-strips," Lisha instructed.

"Yeah, sure I will, but move on with what happened next..." said Neil, impatiently.

"I got into the cell and was strapped onto the seat and the sensors were placed over my head. Then..." here Lisha paused a bit, thinking back. How could she describe the strange sensation when the travel started? "I felt a sudden rush of air, you know, and the feeling that I was getting sucked into something...then the world outside the cell went utterly black. After that I don't know how long, the earth reappeared outside all of a sudden, only it was so different...."

"Which time period did you choose?" Neil was curious.

"It was the year 1985. I didn't have any choice, though. The trip is monitored closely from the central control tower and I had to follow the time-path they had mapped out for me. And did you know that we can't travel back more than a hundred years?" Lisha answered.

“Really? I thought you could go as far back in time as you wanted to.”

“No,” replied Lisha. “It becomes too costly and the government is not willing to spend that much for educational trips. It’s only permitted occasionally for research purpose.”

“OK, carry on. How did you find the earth so long ago?”

“Oh, it was so much greener, Neil. That’s what struck me most. You know those trees we have seen in the national parks? Growing in controlled artificial conditions? The earth back then was full of such trees, growing naturally. It seems it wasn’t so hot then and there were plenty of natural plants.”

“Yeah, our science book mentioned that.”

“But Neil, what I liked most about that time was the birds.”

“Birds?” Neil sounded puzzled as looked enquiringly at Lisha.

“You know, those winged creatures, something like very small aeroplanes? Remember, we have seen them at the zoo and national parks? A few surviving species?”

“Yes of course, I remember now,” cried Neil.

“Those birds were all over the earth back then. Perched on the trees. Flying here and there. I think I read somewhere that after 2030, birds could not survive in the cities as there were no food scraps lying around that they could feed on. Even before then, it was actually difficult to find songbirds. Then slowly, with cities spreading all across the earth and most of the trees getting cut, the environment also got too hot for them. Many species became extinct. Now, there are only a few species in the zoo, kept in an artificially controlled atmosphere.”

Oh yeah, the rise in use of vita-strips also led to less plants being needed to grow foodstuff, since factories could take care

of that.... Anyhow, sounds like you had an exciting trip. But, hey, what about the people? What did they look like?"

"Not very different, I should say. Only dressed quite different, you know. I didn't see anyone in spacesuits. Neither did they need to wear heatsuits. They wore mainly trousers and shirts. Some women wore some long stretch of cloth wrapped around them. Stuff like that. And I think they seemed to be much smaller-built than us. But I do wish I could have brought back that greener earth with me. It was much nicer than the mechanical monster we have right now."

Suddenly, an idea struck Neil and he got off the couch.

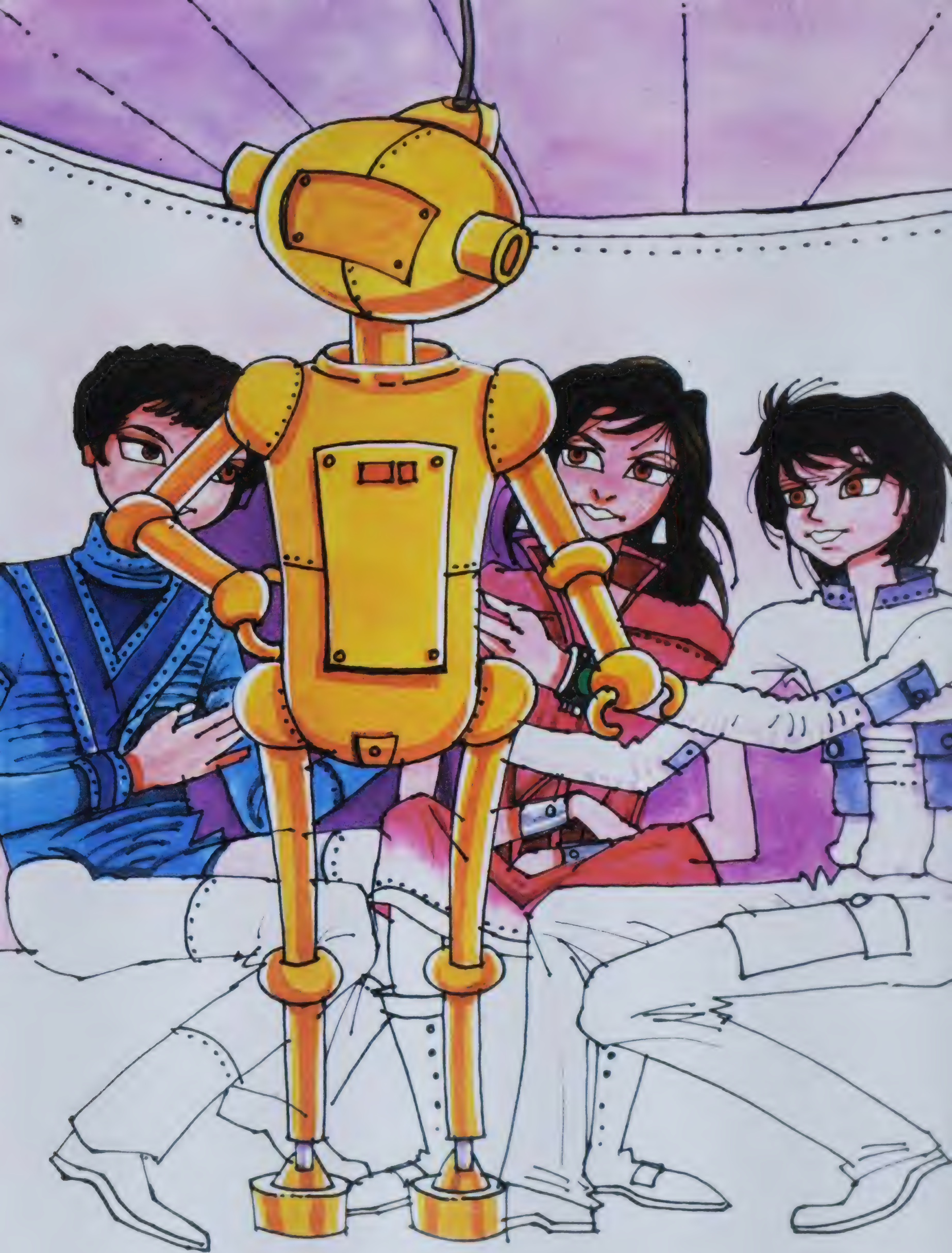
"Hey, Lisha, how about getting a few birds from your time-trip and having our own private zoo here?"

Lisha broke into a laugh. "Come on, Neil, don't you know that just as the people in the past can't see the time-cell or us, nothing from the past can travel to our time? If we try and get out of the cell, we'd get destroyed instantly!"

But Neil wasn't about to give up. "I know what to do. Let's call Aran over. He is full of ideas. He'll suggest something."







A series of three parallel lines, two solid and one dashed, slanting upwards from left to right, with a pinkish-purple wash behind them.

ARAN

Lisha spoke over the videophone to their neighbourhood friend Aran, asking him to come over to their house. Soon, a wild-haired, short and stocky boy came and greeted them. His personal robot, K, also followed him into the living-room. K was a source of great envy for Lisha and Neil, who did not have a personal robot. A bright yellow robot, K was a little shorter than Aran and was an amazing source of information. It was also very good in doing analysis and giving suggestions.

“So? What’s the problem?” asked Aran, guessing correctly that there was, indeed, some problem.

Lisha and her brother detailed their problem and Aran nodded sympathetically. “You know, I’ve felt the same way for quite some time now. Our earth is certainly more efficient than it earlier was, but so much has been lost!”

“But I am sure we can do something, Aran!” said Neil in a determined way.

“Why don’t we find out from K where all the birds are there on the earth right now?” suggested Aran.

“Brilliant!” cried out Lisha and Neil together.

Within seconds the three friends were looking at the display screen on K, which showed a list of a handful of zoos, national parks and forest reserves where some species of birds

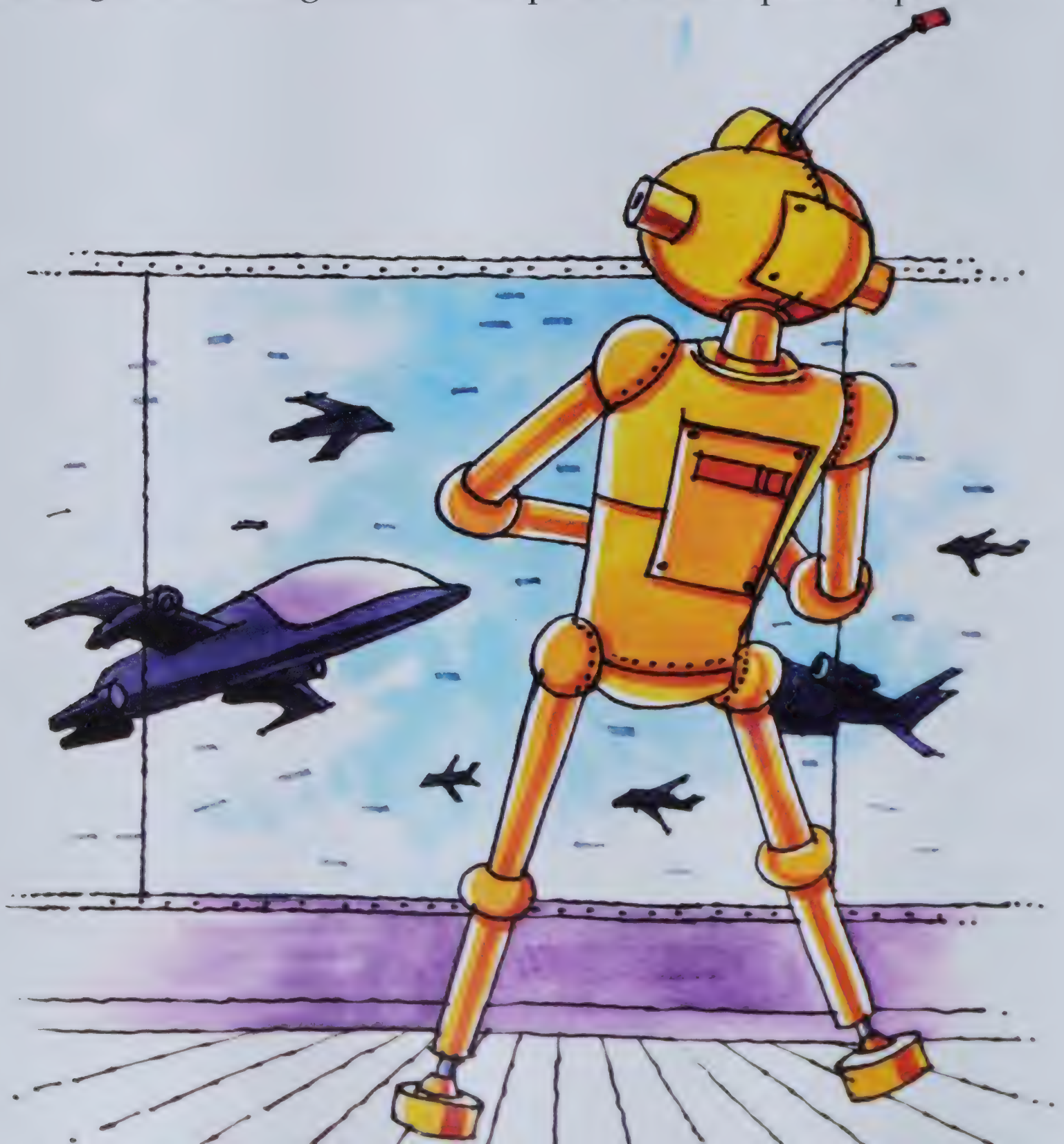
had been kept. Aran let out a sudden yell.

"Hey, look! There are some individuals' names as well!"

"Yes," agreed Lisha, "but all of them seem to be living quite far away."

"One person lives quite close by," pointed out Neil, "see Dr Mikados, an ornithologist who lives on Clee Island. That's quite close to our place."

The children were excited by this discovery and they took their eyes off K's screen to discuss the implications. K meanwhile glided off to the glass wall to look at the continuous landing and taking-off of aeroplanes and spaceships.



But Aran, his mind intent on solving the problem at hand, was annoyed. "Hey, K! Come here at once! Can't you see we need to do this fast?" He called.

"No!" K's reply was clear.

"What?" Aran was taken aback. But his voice softened, because he was well aware of the occasional surprises sprung by his robot, since they were the result of his own programming into K's circuitry. "Come on, K, it'll only take a little while," he cajoled, winking at his two friends, who were already beginning to chuckle.

But K continued to look out of the window.

"Hmm, let's see. I'll get you the toy plane I promised." Aran tried again.

At this, K turned around and started moving back slowly to the group waiting for it, as the three friends burst out into laughter.

Further research revealed that Dr Elena Mikados was living on an island where she was among a handful of extremely wealthy residents. In the large grounds surrounding her house, she kept thousands of birds of over a hundred species in an artificially maintained environment.

"Wow! Just look at the names—swans, cranes, hummingbirds, parakeets, owls, pigeons, cuckoos, eagles, vultures.... There are pictures given here as well," cried Lisha.

"I wonder what will happen to the birds after she dies," said Neil thoughtfully. "Nothing is mentioned about her family. She seems to be living alone on this island with her staff, and she is already ninety-five years old."

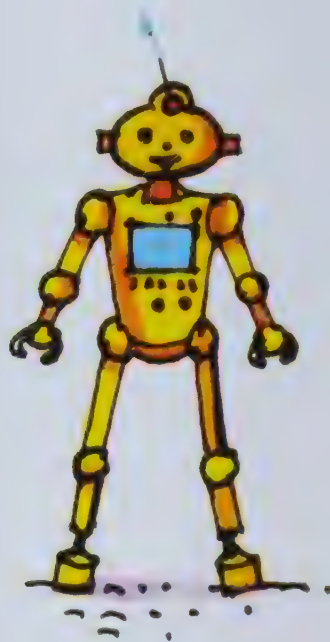
"Perhaps she'll give them to the government for keeping in the national parks," suggested Aran.

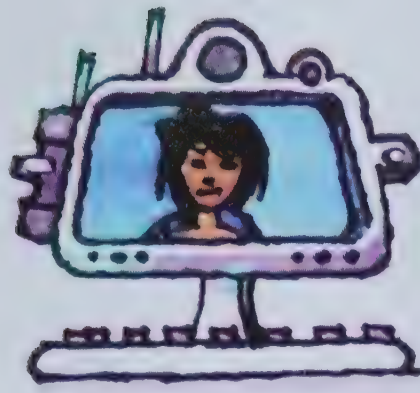
"Our government thinks spending on preserving species of birds is a waste of resources. They think birds are useless. They would rather buy arms or build roads or spacecrafts or some such stupid things," replied Lisha with a degree of sarcasm.

"Anyhow, I must be getting back now." Aran stood up. "I have loads of school-work left to do." Lisha and Neil looked at each other. So did they. They had all forgotten their school-work in the excitement.

"OK, let's meet at school tomorrow and discuss this," said Lisha. "All of us will try and come up with some idea and we'll have a brain-storming session at lunch-break."

"Sure," agreed the others as they broke up for the day.





THE IDEA

Next day the three friends met at the school atrium to discuss ways of meeting Dr Mikados, to at least get to talk to her.

"If we somehow get an appointment with her, we can fly over and meet her," suggested Neil.

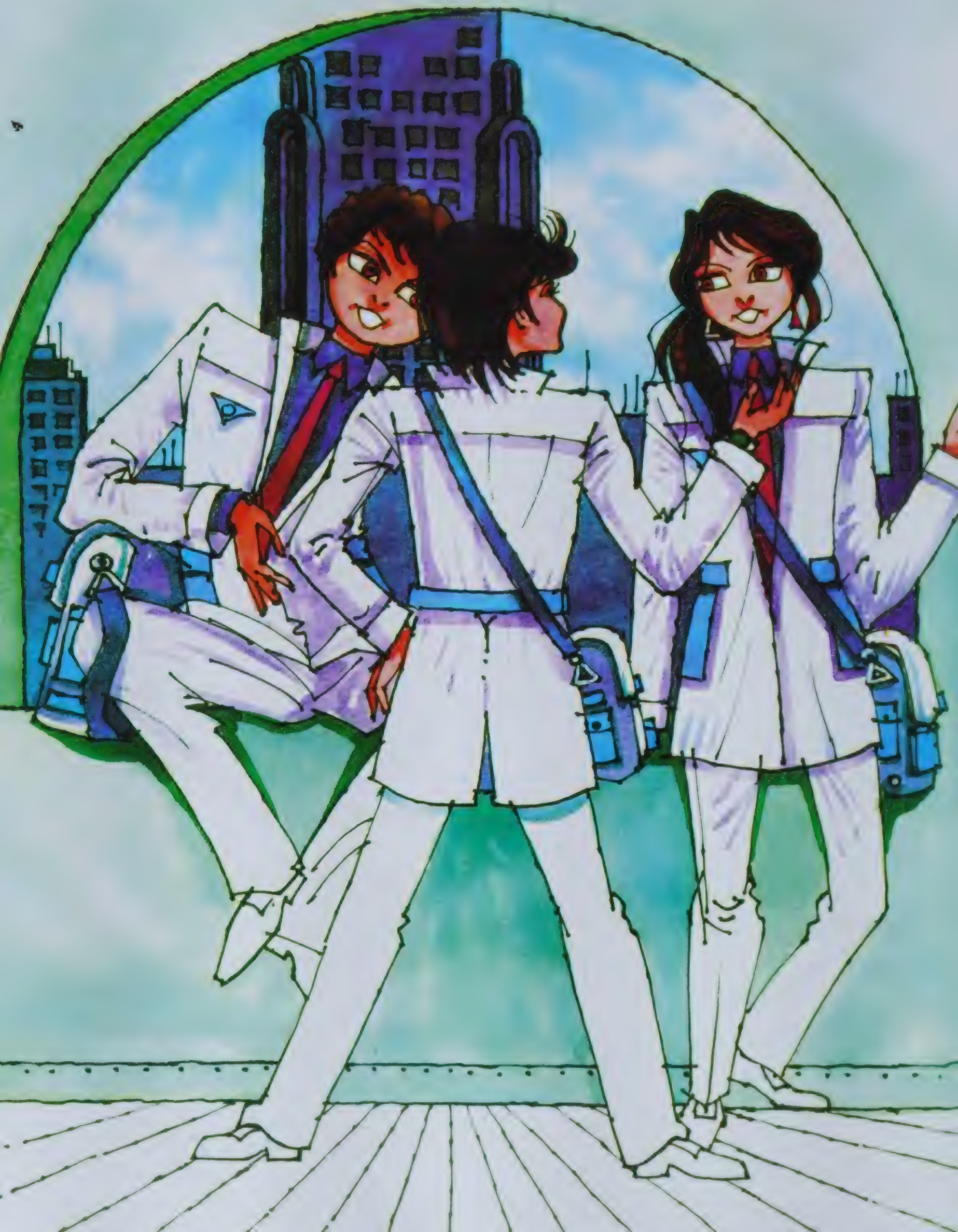
"Yeah," agreed Aran, "and the island is close enough so that the tickets won't be very costly. Our pocket money can cover the expenses."

"Yours maybe, but not ours," demurred Lisha, knowing that Aran's parents were wealthy and gave him a much bigger allowance than Lisha and Neil got.

"Don't worry about the money; you can borrow some from me now and pay back later. Is that OK?" said Aran. "Now let's get on with our plan to meet up with Dr Mikados. Should we just call up and try to get an appointment or send her an e-mail?"

Neil had an idea. "We can tell her that we are making a video on birds for our school project and need her expert opinion. We can also try and get some clips of the birds she has."

"Great idea!" cried Aran and Lisha together. Suddenly the three children realised that they were the only students left inside the atrium. The break was over. Rushing out to their



respective classes, they made hurried plans to meet later in the evening.

In his big house, Aran had a nice basement with naturally cool environment. He had furnished it after his own taste, which meant shape-shifting walls and couches and latest technical gadgets like virtual playstations. Aran, Neil and Lisha met there in the evening and the fourth member in the meeting was K. Putting their heads together, they came up with a message which read like this:

Dear Dr Mikados,

We are the students of Sector M School in Seleria State. Could you please give us an interview for our school project on the topic 'Birds'? We would also like to film some of the rare species of birds that you have, if you would kindly allow us. Please let us know the dates that would suit you for the interview.

The reply to the e-mail was quite prompt, but negative, and the children were taken aback by the harshness of the refusal. *"I cannot give any interview and certainly not to school children. Please do not waste my time with such requests."*

"She certainly sounds eccentric!" commented Neil.

"Well, she is quite old, you know, Neil," reasoned Lisha. *"Still, she does sound quite rude."*

Aran was not to be deterred, however. *"Should we try to call her? There's a number listed here,"* he pointed at the computer screen. But the phone kept ringing and no one answered. Repeated attempts failed as the children could not receive any image on the videophone.

"Let's pack-up for today. I'm sure one of us will think of some way to get in touch with her," said Lisha. The others agreed and Aran reluctantly waved good-bye to his friends.

The next day was a holiday. Lisha and Neil were sleeping late, when a shrill, insistent beeping sound woke them up. Lisha rubbed her eyes as she watched her brother jump up and reach for his phone. It was Aran, sounding excited and breathless. "I got through! I got through to Dr Mikados!"

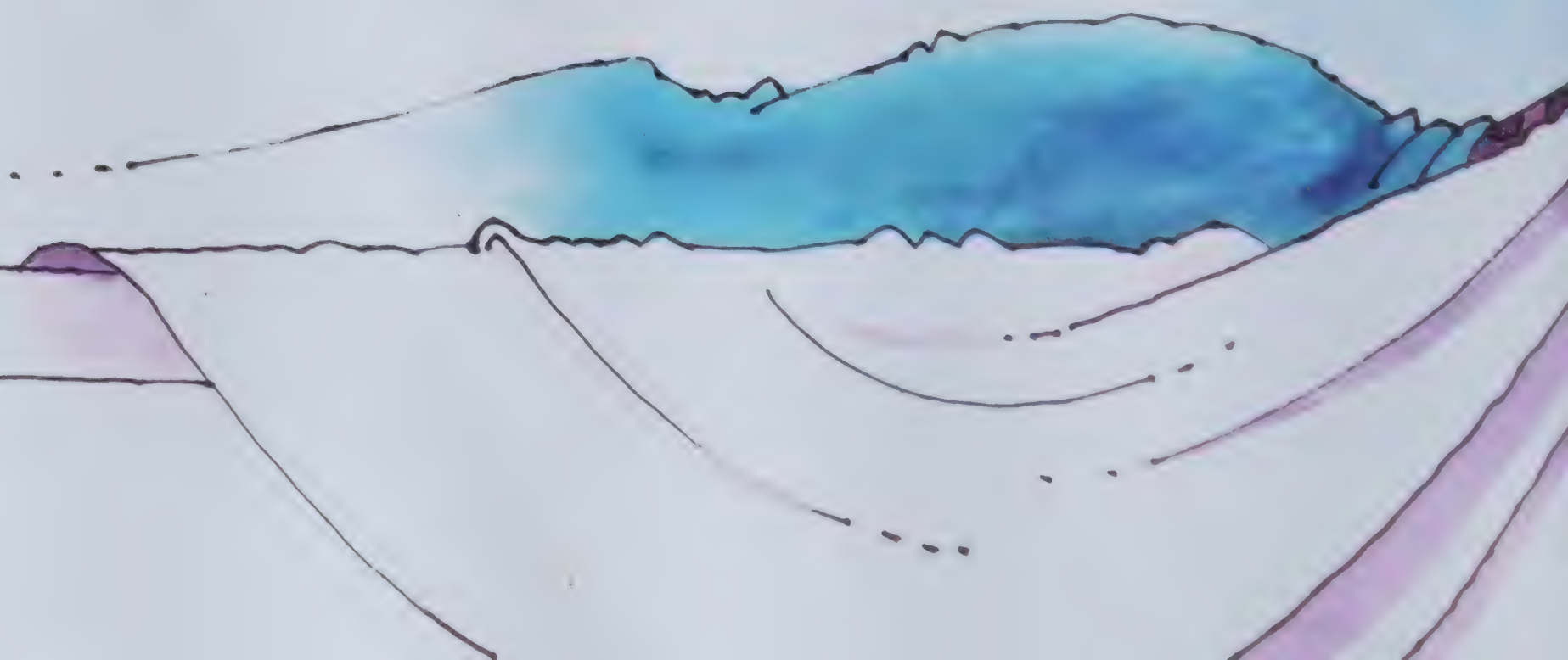
"How did you manage to do that?" the brother and sister duo were astonished.

"I had woken up in the middle of the night—you know, this bird business was worrying me and I could not sleep peacefully. As I went to drink some water, I just thought of trying to call the old lady once more. And guess what? She came on the line and promised to give us an interview a week from today! It is over the weekend so we won't miss school. But there was something odd...."

"What?" Lisha and Neil cried out together.

"She... she sounded a little strange, you know. For one thing, she was whispering into the phone. The video image also wasn't clear, the light in her room seemed to be dim. And why did she e-mail such a curt reply and then agree to meet us when I called late in the night?"

"You are right," agreed Lisha. "Something strange is going





on there. Still, if we have to make it for the interview, we'd better get ready—it's next weekend, just a few days away!"

"Wow! We had better read up something on birds," Neil was laughing as Aran rang off. "Till yesterday I hardly remembered they existed."

"And we must also get permission from our parents," Lisha reminded him.

"We'll solve all that, don't you worry. Clee Island! Here we come!" Cried her brother and sprang out of bed.



DR MIKADOS

The journey to Clee Island was exciting. Although all three were used to flying, they could not help experiencing a thrill when their plane flew quite low over the sparkling blue ocean towards a dark blob that they knew to be Clee Island. Aran had brought K along as well, since the robot had helped him out on many occasions earlier.

Clee Island was small in size and only a handful of people lived there; rich people who preferred a secluded life. The children had booked a room in one of the few hotels on the island. Stopping there to leave their bags, they bathed and got ready to meet Dr Mikados. The cool breeze in this small island





allowed the children to do without their protective heatsuits, and they all heaved a sigh of relief. Lisha looked down at her sleeveless yellow cotton tunic, enjoying the change from her usual wear and feeling the breeze. Neil and Aran were dressed in shorts and sleeveless tunic tops.

Having decided to leave K behind at the hotel, the three friends set out for their destination. There was greenery around



them, something that had almost disappeared in the cities. Neil carried his small camera for the filming and Aran fiddled with buttons on the computer attached to his wrist watch. As the attached liquid crystal display screen was released, he quickly glanced through the notes he had made there. The children learned that Dr Mikados had a vast experience with birds. She had published numerous research papers on various species of birds and at one time used to be quite a public figure, attending seminars and conferences worldwide. She was unmarried, preferring to devote her life to the cause of scientific research and had collected many rare species of birds from her visits around the globe. But since the last few years, Dr Elena Mikados had withdrawn herself from public life and lived quietly in her mansion on Clee Island.

Lisha, Neil and Aran were quite awestruck when they had their first glimpse of the huge mansion. Behind imposing steel gates, it rose like a graceful white flower at the end of a curving driveway. The house was surrounded by a vast expanse of grounds, where, even from this distance, the children could see many huge semi-transparent domes, filled with what looked like hundreds of birds. But no human or robot could be seen there. As the children hovered at the gates, wondering how to enter into the premises, they heard some voice:

"Please state your business."

All three looked around, but could not see anyone.

"Must be a hidden speaker somewhere," commented Aran in a low voice. He raised his voice. "We have come to interview Dr Mikados for our school project. She asked us to come today."

"Can I have your names, please?"

"Lisha, Neil and Aran."

After a minute or so, the gates swung open silently and the voice announced, "Welcome to Dr Elena Mikados' residence. Dr Mikados will receive you in the Green Room."

The Green Room was, as expected, furnished in green colour with a soothing effect on the eye. The children noticed that the use of metals was not as extensive here, as in the cities. An old lady was sitting behind a low table and rose as they entered the room.

"Hello, I am Dr Elena Mikados," she said, joining her palms in greeting. "You are the children from the Seleria State School?"

The three friends returned her greetings and Lisha spoke for the group, as they sat down on the mats placed in front of the table.

"Hello, Dr Mikados. It's wonderful to be able to meet you. I am Lisha and this is my friend, Aran and my brother Neil."

Dr Elena Mikados was dressed in a pale beige dress and her white hair was cropped short. Keeping her face grim, she said, "You can call me Elena. Now please tell me what you would like to know. But remember to keep it brief. I have very little time to spare."

Aran started off with some questions about some of the birds he knew that Dr Mikados also had in her private

collection. She seemed pleased and her tone softened slightly.

“Oh, the Peregrine falcon? They are some of the fastest known birds. Yes, I do have a few in my private collection. The last of the species, actually.”

“Could we have a look, Dr Mik—I mean, Elena?” the question came from Neil.

“Mmm...why not? After the interview, all three of you can visit the premises and take a few shots. You won’t get to see these birds anywhere else on the earth.”

“But Elena, this brings me to my most important question,” Aran broke in. “Why have birds almost disappeared from the face of the earth? Why didn’t the government try to preserve some species?”

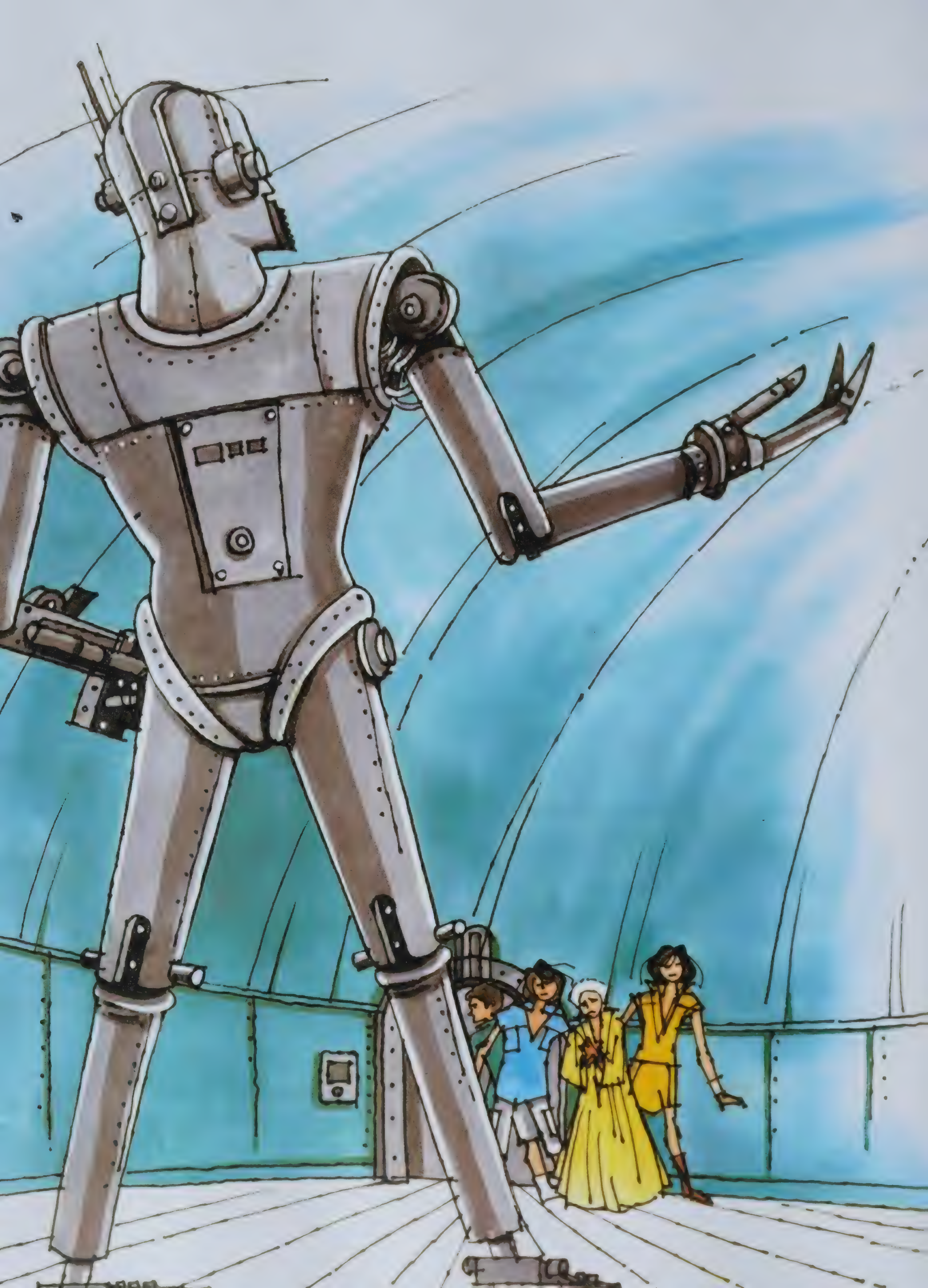
Dr Mikados’ face was grave as she replied to Aran’s question.

“You must be aware of that, initially, after the 2030s, as the cities spread all over the earth, the number of birds steadily declined because there was scarcity of food scraps in the cities to feed on. Next came the deadly bird flu, which wiped out millions of birds at a go. All the while we had been cutting more and more trees to house more and more people. Slowly the forest cover got less, the earth became too hot for birds and, indeed, many other animals, and only a few species survived in small pockets. Mostly in artificially controlled environment.”

The children were surprised by the scientist’s answer.

“What about the government?” persisted Aran. “Why haven’t they bothered about these beautiful creatures?”

“The government must carry out its expansion plans and needs its resources for many important projects, to maintain



its military power.”

Lisha could not believe her ears. There was a passionate outburst from her.

“But Elena! Surely preserving different species of birds and other animals should have been one of the government’s priorities! The earth is not just a cluster of buildings and roads and bridges and flyovers. We should not have allowed it to become the ugly concrete jungle that it has become today.”

“Last question, please.” Dr Elena Mikados’ crisp voice cut across Lisha’s outburst.

Aran spoke up. “What will happen to your private collection of birds when you are no longer there?”

“It will be taken over by the government. And now, if you come through this side-door, I’ll show you my collection of birds.”

The children had already caught a glimpse of the massive domes from the gates, where many exotic birds seemed to be sitting on trees or were flying around from branch to branch. They were quite excited at the thought of getting a close look at many rare birds. They stepped back as Elena approached the side-door, but the scientist still brushed very close to them as she walked out and beckoned the three children to follow her.

Suddenly a mechanical voice called out, “Dr Mikados, the interview is over. The visitors can leave now.”

Startled, the children turned around to see that a large size robot had appeared from another doorway of the Green Room. Glistening black in colour, the sleek robot had bright red eyes and its mechanical arm was extended towards Elena in a cautionary manner. Elena, too, had stopped in her tracks and,

as she wheeled around, the three friends saw a dramatic change in her expression. There was fear in her eyes as she quickened her steps and came into the room once more.

"Of course, of course. Why are you going outside? You should know that visitors are not allowed in the garden," she said in a trembling voice. The three friends looked at each other, speechless. They were well aware that Dr Mikados was going back on her words, but could hardly point that out.

Under the watchful eyes of the robot, the visitors left Mikados' residence. Once outside the fortress-type steel gates, they all broke out into speech.

"What happened?" cried Neil. "Did I hear her correctly? It was Elena who invited us for filming the birds!"

"Such a great scientist going back on her words!" Lisha, too, was agitated.

"Calm down, guys." Said Aran. "It's a puzzle. Couldn't you see she was scared of that robot? That's what made her change her mind."

"That's true...." said Lisha thoughtfully. "But why do you think she was so scared?"

"I think the robot has some sort of power over her," Neil concluded, as they reached their hotel. "Well, quite a wasted trip, I must say. We didn't get much out of it."

The three friends camped down on Lisha's bed in her room, their expression down as K came from Aran's room and joined the meeting.

"Let's get the famous palm-fruit juice that they have here," Neil suggested, not one to feel dispirited for long.

"Yeah, let's," chorused the other two. Lisha fished in her pocket for money and brought out some strange object along

with a fistful of currency.

“Hey, what’s this? Where did *this* come from?” Lisha was confused.

Everyone looked up, startled, and started examining the small, round, black object in her palm.

“Let me take a look at it,” Aran sounded excited as he took the black thing in his hand.



Brother and sister duo looked hopefully at Aran since they knew that this stout boy was quite a storehouse of information about all kinds of gadgets.

"I think this is a small tape disc. A new kind of player has come in the market, which can play these discs."

"Well?" cried Neil impatiently. "Do you have such a player?"

"I think I do," replied Aran, lost in thought, as he rummaged among his bags. K helped and told him, "You have the player in the bottom right pocket of your bag."

Putting the disc into the player, the children were stunned to hear Dr Mikados' voice speaking in a whisper.



THE MESSAGE

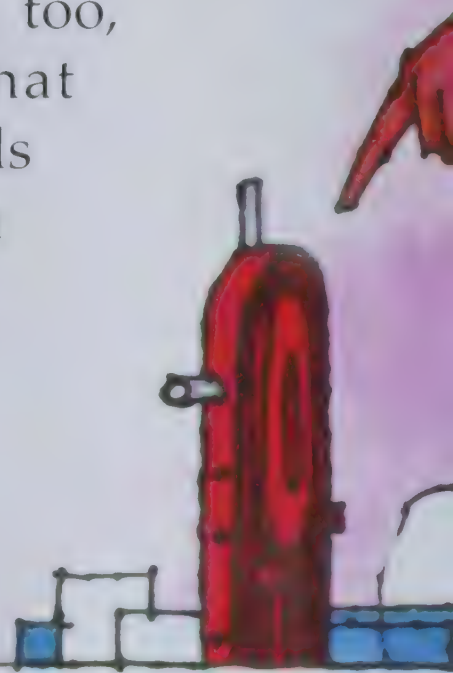
Dr Mikados' message was an appeal for help.

"Children, I don't have much time. You must help me out. I have been kept like a prisoner in my own house for the last few years, constantly under surveillance from the government. All my assets will become national property, automatically, after my death, in case I do not leave behind a will. You know that there is a small but very powerful group within the government, whose only aim is to keep on increasing our military power. This group is known as the Supreme Office. In fact, if given a chance, this Supreme Office would like to overthrow the government and impose their dictatorship. It is because of the interference of this group of people that many of the government's projects to protect animals and birds have been abandoned.

The Supreme Office wants my property, the house and the huge land that I own. They have employed two caretaker robots on the pretext of my ill-health, but the real reason is that they do not want to let me out of sight, in case I make a new Will. My land and property are important to the Supreme Office because they plan to build a military base here, dealing with defence research. They have no interest in all the species of birds that live here. In fact, I am sure they are going to kill

them as soon as they get their hands on my property. Their only problem is that they are not sure whether I have made a Will and hidden it somewhere and, which I can smuggle out of the premises. I have told them that I haven't and kept them at bay. This is so that they think they won't have any trouble getting the land after my death. I am sure they would like to kill me off, but since I am in the public eye, they have not done it yet. You see, a sudden death might lead to an investigation. After a few more months or a year, as I fade away from the public eye, you may wake up one day to hear the news that Dr Mikados passed away in her sleep. Even now, I am constantly watched. Only once or twice, in late night hours, a caretaker might be busy elsewhere attending a phone or some other duty given by the Supreme Office, and I get a chance to act with some freedom, but that too, within my own room.

Sadly, I am too old now to overpower these robots. Although I have friends outside—mostly scientists—I can't be sure whom to trust, since many of them have sided with the Supreme Office for money, power and high positions. But I do trust your childish innocence and it is children like you who give me hope. You'll find that some children, too, are getting brainwashed into thinking that protecting various species of birds and animals are not important as compared to keeping an army ready for intergalactic wars. You were the first students to approach me for an interview about birds in a long, long, time. That really gave me hope. I gave my consent one night, when one of my





caretaker robots was out of the room for a short while, and I was pretending to be asleep. That is when I answered your phone call. Later, they let me carry on with the sham interview so that there is no suspicion when I call off the interview all of a sudden. Today, I have another opportunity and I am recording this tape for you. I'll pass this on to you in case I feel that you think like I do and in case I feel you can help me.

I'll come to the main point of my message now. I actually have a Will, which I have hidden. The government will destroy it if they can lay their hands on it. I must get it out of this island to my lawyers, Stone and Draz, in the Takoda City on the mainland. Then, they can contest the government's claim in case of my death. I have left enough funds to convert my house and grounds into a zoo. This zoo will house all the species of the birds that I have, so that those birds can breed and increase their population. A day might even come when the number will be enough to give out some birds to small zonal zoos. You must retrieve the Will, children. It's hidden (and here her voice became almost inaudible) in the cage of that beautiful, exotic bird.... Oh , why can't I remember the name? I must, I must, what's that name—sounds similar to that old European dance...." And here the tape ended abruptly.



THE CLUE

The friends looked at each other.

“Oh, no!” Neil burst out, voicing the frustration of all three. “Why did the tape stop here?”

“The caretaker robot must have come back into the room,” guessed Lisha. “Do you know, I think Elena must have dropped the tape in my pocket when she brushed against us in the Green Room, as we were going outside....” She continued thoughtfully.

“Which bird was she talking about?” asked Neil. “And anyhow, even if we guessed the bird’s name, how could we ever hope to get inside the grounds of her house again and search the cage?”

“Hmm, that’s true,” agreed Aran, but he wasn’t about to give up so soon.

“Still, Lisha, Neil, why don’t we try and solve the puzzle of which cage she meant? One step at a time, you know. Suppose we solve it, then....”

“Yes, what then?” interrupted Neil. “How can we enter Elena’s house?”

“I have some kind of plan for that part,” Aran was guarded in his reply. “Let’s try and crack this first.”

“I do know some names, like macaw, cockatoo,

sparrow...but none of them remind me of any dance," Lisha sounded despondent.

"How about taking K's help?" Neil suggested. "We could look at the list of European dances starting with all the alphabets!"

Within seconds, all three were watching K's screen, which listed a bewildering list of dances.

"Kolo, hambo, jig, foxtrot, waltz, flamenco, square..." recited Lisha and suddenly stopped. "There it is! It's flamenco! Sounds like flamingo."

"Flamingo is a bird? And flamenco is a dance?" asked Neil, wide-eyed.

"Flamenco was a famous Spanish dance, stupid," Lisha scolded her brother for his ignorance.

"Hey, Neil, you're also supposed to be an expert on birds," laughed Aran. "Remember our school magazine?"

"I think the only thing I am an expert on is air-ball and skateboarding." Neil replied with a grin.

"There's a match tonight between the Launchers and the Giants," Aran reminded him.

"Here, look," Lisha interrupted hurriedly, afraid that the talk of sport would stall the search for Dr Mikados' Will. She touched the screen on K to show the picture of a graceful bird of a vivid pink colour.

"It's beautiful!" said Neil softly.

"Isn't it?" Lisha echoed. "I am so glad I did some homework on birds before I came here. That's why I could spot the similarity between the two words quickly."

"Good work, Lisha! Now we are getting somewhere," Aran was beaming all over his round face.

"No, we are not getting anywhere," Neil retorted. "Dr Mikados' house is completely out of bounds for us."

"Out of bounds for us, yes...." replied Aran.

"What do you mean, Aran?"

"Not out of bounds for K... now listen to my plan...."





THE PLAN

The three friends, along with K, left their hotel quite late at night. A thick mist was slowly enveloping the island and all of them heaved a sigh of relief when the mansion gates loomed up ahead of them.

"I was afraid we'd lost the way and would be going round and round the island!" whispered Lisha.

Aran put a finger on his lips, signalling her to keep quiet as they approached the gates. He motioned K to go ahead as they hung around in the shadows, half-hidden by the mist.

K reached up to the gate and pushed, looking around for a button.

"Please state your business," came the deep voice as before. K's mechanical voice rang out in the night.



"The Supreme Office has sent me with an urgent mission. I must see Dr Elena immediately."

"What is the mission? Please be specific."

"It is about the Will. I am not allowed to reveal anything more at present. It's urgent and the Supreme Office will be extremely annoyed if this delay is reported."





The gates swung open silently as K advanced into Dr Elena's vast, sprawling property. A long driveway led up to the great mansion, which shone like a star in the distance. There was darkness all around. The fuzzy outlines of the domes could barely be made out in the gloom and the whole effect was eerie. The disembodied voice rang out again.

"Enter the house by the main door and let yourself into the Green Room, please."

As K marched on, the gates behind closed silently, merging with the blackness that surrounded them. The gathering mist hid three figures running silently towards the cages.

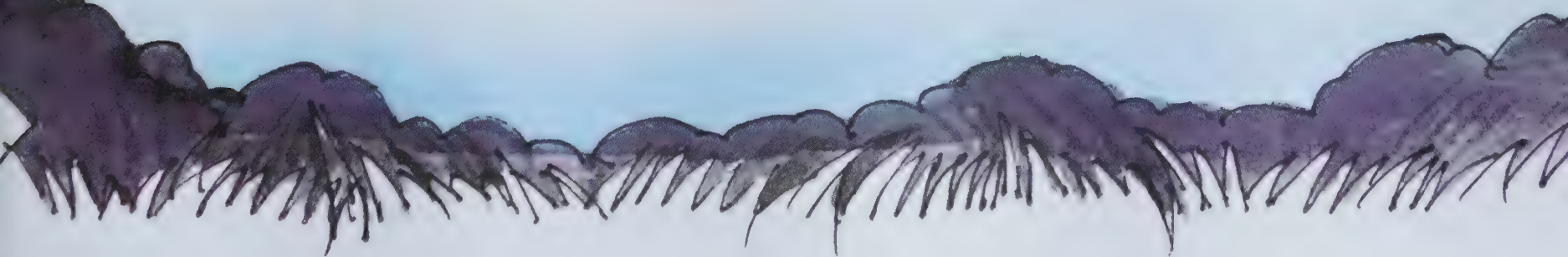
As they raced across the grass, their heart in the mouth, the three friends could hardly believe that they had succeeded in entering the compound. But they had to run without any sense of where they were going, as long as they were moving away from the main house, since the fields were completely dark. It was incredible that in the morning they had caught a glimpse of such exotic birds in this very place! Clearly the Supreme Office's caretakers were unwilling to spend any resources on the birds, to the extent of not providing any lighting for the grounds.



Once far away from the main house, the children stopped to catch their breath, and thumped each other on the back for having managed to gain entry into the area, crawling on their stomach.

"That was a brilliant idea, Aran! The sensor could not pick us up." Neil hugged his friend enthusiastically.

"Actually, I had noticed in the morning that they had photo-electric sensors," replied Aran, trying to look modest



but failing. "You see, the beam can reach a certain fixed area and often can't reach things of very small height, close to the ground."

"But what if we'd been caught?" Lisha asked.

"Most likely, we'd have been booted out. We just had to take the risk. Remember Elena's appeal? Even now we might get caught...."

"But Elena said there are only two caretakers. I don't think they felt they needed any more security, with only one old lady to manage," Neil pointed out. "They don't know about the will."

"Exactly," replied Aran. Then he added with urgency in his voice, "We don't have much time. Let's start looking for the flamingoes' cage at once."

"How can we find the cage in this darkness?" Lisha asked.

"Well, first of all, it should be a fairly big cage. More like an enclosure. These birds like to move about in flocks and their natural habitat is muddy stretches of water," answered Aran.

"Wow!" exclaimed Neil. "You think Elena would have managed to create an artificial lake-like place here?"

"Sure." Aran and Lisha replied together. Lisha elaborated further. "An artificial lake can be created and water can be circulated in the lake through a pump so that fresh water is maintained. I am sure some muddy place will also be kept—like an island—so that they can build their nests and hatch their eggs there."

"Wait a second!" Neil interrupted. "If the flamingoes' house is actually an enclosed stretch of water and muddy land, then surely Elena couldn't have hidden the Will there. It would be

very difficult to retrieve a paper or a tape there."

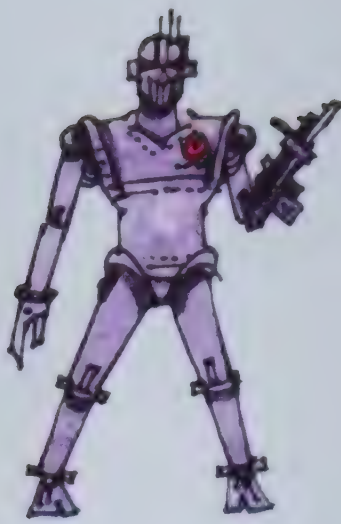
All three stopped in their tracks. Neil's words made sense. Then, where could the Will be hidden? Or was Elena just rambling on in the tape? Had she become senile and was imagining things?

"There is still one possibility..." said Aran thoughtfully. "Suppose it's hidden somewhere in the entrance to the enclosure, like the lock or the doorframe?"

"It's worth giving it a try," said Lisha.

"Why don't we look around and try to find a map for the place?" Neil suggested. "Good idea," said Aran. "But, we must be quick. The more time we spend here, the higher the chances of getting caught, although my guess is that at worst they'll just push us out of the grounds. Still, our attempt is Elena's only hope. I wonder how K is managing.... I wish I had remembered to turn this on earlier...."

Here, Aran pushed a button on the computer in his watch and contacted K. He started to send instructions rapidly via his computer, so that K could act on them.



K'S ADVENTURE

The children had told K that its movements were being monitored. So, as instructed by Aran, K plodded on to the large house looming up ahead. As soon as it stepped into the Green Room, two robots sprang up as if from nowhere and glided silently towards K. The robots were much taller and sturdier than K in build. Their black metallic bodies were shining in the artificial light and it seemed that their designer had made no efforts to soften their body contours and visage, which were quite harsh to look at.

"State your business, robot."

"I have already informed you that I am from the Supreme Office," K's electronic voice intoned.

"What is the proof?"

"How else would I know about the Will?" K pointed out, following Aran's guidelines.

"Outside this house, only the Supreme Office is aware of the will."

Aran had guessed correctly that the caretaker robots were not willing to contact someone in the government and verify K's account, especially this late in the night. Since they had been instructed that only Supreme Office employees knew about the Will, they did not argue further.

"Please tell us the objective of your visit."

"I have an information that Dr Mikados has a Will hidden somewhere here, where she might have bequeathed this house and property to someone other than the government. I was sent to look for it."

"You intend to search the house?"

"Yes, and the grounds, but first I must question Dr Elena, to get some clues."

"Dr Mikados is asleep now and would not like to be disturbed."

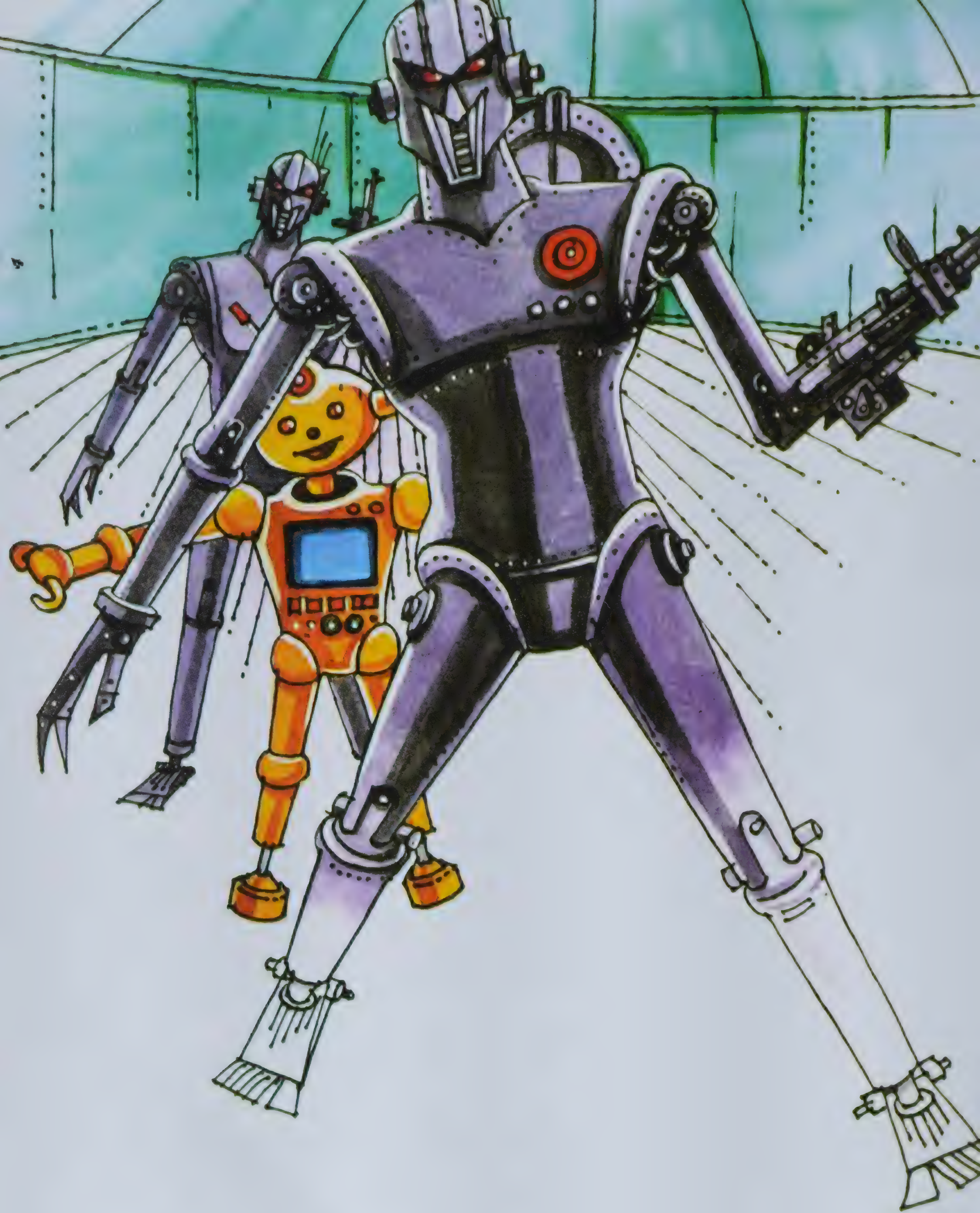
K held its stand. "How many times must I repeat that this business is urgent? If the Will is not found and destroyed immediately, the Supreme Office will not be able to get hold of Dr Mikados' property."

These words set off the robots into action. One of them went up to K and motioned K to follow. The second robot brought up the rear. Flanked by the two robots, K marched on to Dr Mikados' room.

Dr Mikados' room was in darkness, the only light coming was from a lamp on a low table beside her bed. She was lying on the bed, apparently fast asleep, but K, who was smarter than the usual household robots, thanks to Aran's fiddling with his circuitry, could deduce from the speed of her breath that she was not asleep. The two guard-robots roused Elena and informed her about K's visit. Elena stared at K with suspicion, little knowing that here was an ally.

It was at this point that Aran's frantic instructions reached K and following those, K took the two robots aside.

"Let me talk to her alone. She will not respond properly if you are here."



"That is impossible." Their harsh voice rang out. "We must know what is going on. The Supreme Office has entrusted us with her. We cannot neglect our duty."

"You will not be neglecting your duty. Stand outside the door and keep guard. There is no other exit from this room, so you need not fear that she will escape. Besides, she is too old to try such adventurous stuff."

Again K's reasoning satisfied the robots and they left both Elena and K in the room to stand guard outside.

As soon as the door closed, K activated its screen, echoing Aran's hope that hidden cameras would not catch the message in the dim light. With fascinated eyes, Elena read the message flashing across the screen :

I AM A FRIEND OF THE CHILDREN YOU MET IN THE MORNING. WE ARE TRYING TO RESCUE YOU. FOLLOW THESE INSTRUCTIONS. PRETEND THAT THE WILL IS HIDDEN IN THE GROUNDS SOMEWHERE NEAR THE GATES AND TAKE ME THERE. HURRY!

The screen went dark and K resumed talking:

"Where is the Will, Dr Mikados?"

"What Will?" Elena's voice was trembling.

"You are well aware of the Will I refer to, doctor. Your game is up, Dr Elena Mikados. We have an information that you have hidden a Will somewhere in the house or in the grounds. Now, come on, where is it?"

Elena capitulated. "All right, I will tell you where it is hidden."

"And send me on a wild chase? No, Dr Mikados, I cannot

take that chance. You must personally take me there and hand over the Will."

Elena moved forward and the doors slid open; the two guard robots were waiting just outside.

"Dr Mikados is taking me to the place where she has hidden the Will. I must retrieve it and return to the headquarters at once." K informed them.

"Where is the Will hidden, Dr Mikados?" asked one of the robots.

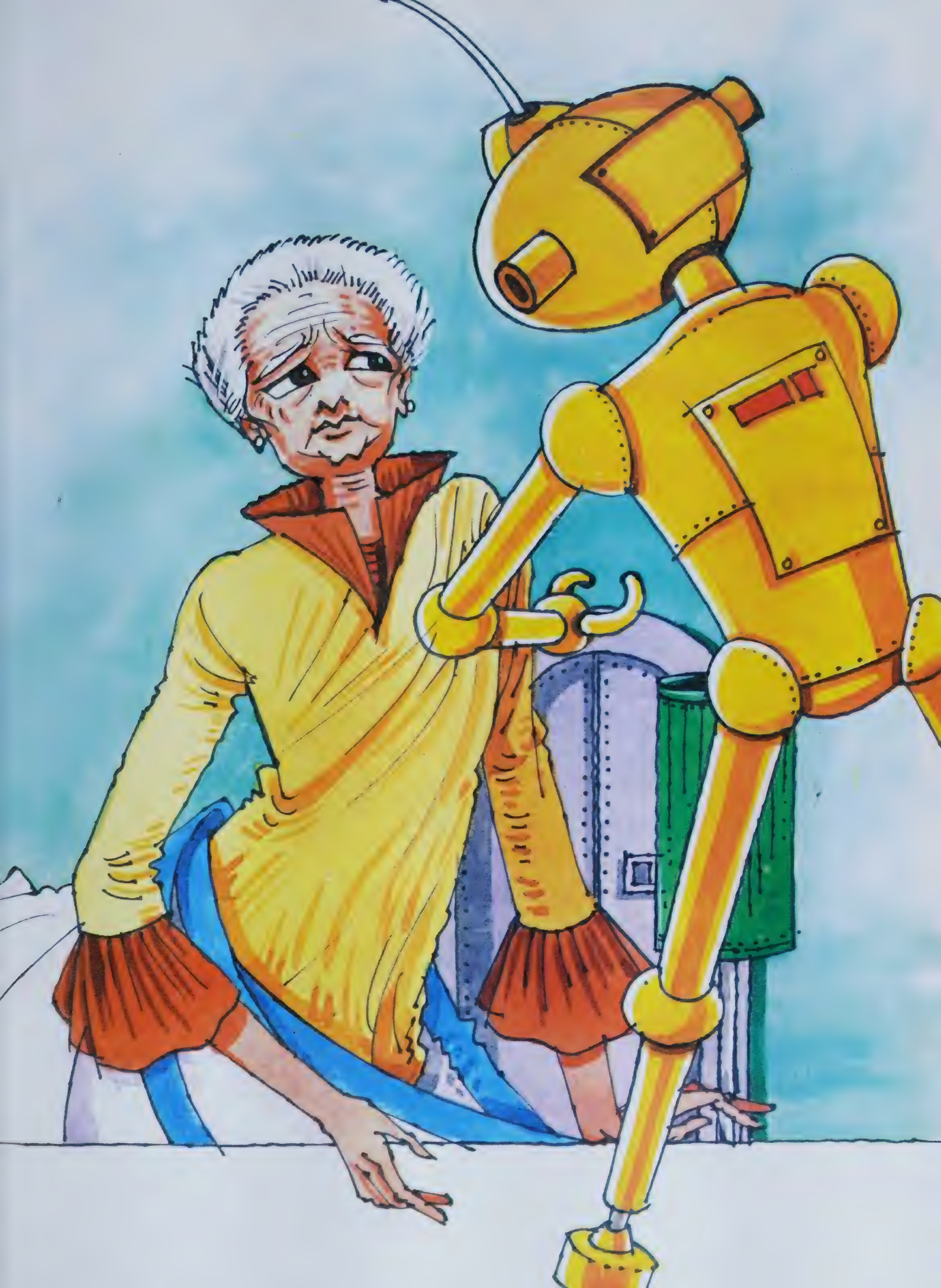
"It's in the guard-house, next to the main gates," replied Elena in a low voice, showing a lot of reluctance.

"She may be lying," the second robot warned K. "It may be a plan to escape."

"How can she escape when the gates are closed?" said K. "Only you two can open the gates. Do not worry, she is safe with me. Besides, she is too old and weak to cause any trouble."

Before the robots could say anything more. K had started in the direction of the main gates, Elena by its side.









THE CLIMAX

The three friends had meanwhile, managed to locate the flamingoes' cage. As expected, the gates to the enclosure were locked, but there was a small shed outside, where knee-length rubber boots were kept for wading in the muddy water inside the enclosure, along with bird feed and other things. There was no lock on the door.

"This must be the place!" Neil said excitedly. "I am sure the Will is hidden somewhere here."

It did seem to be the only possible place and the three children took up three different areas of the shed for a thorough search.

Aran had meanwhile, been in touch with K through his computer. Seeing K and Elena set off for the gates, he urged his friends to be quick.

"We must hurry! K wants us to reach the Will to it at the guard-house next to the gates, immediately."

"Oh, no!" Lisha wailed in dismay. "We haven't found it yet!"

"Even if we don't find the Will, at least we must rescue Elena!" replied Aran.

"Whether we find it or not, this is the last time I rummage around in a pile of muddy boots," grumbled Neil, who had

taken the responsibility of going through the boot-rack. He was wearily putting the last pair away when his hand touched something hard at the back of the rack. Stiffening, he bent down and explored the back-wall of the shoe-rack carefully. Yes, there was something taped on the wall!

Aran and Lisha, hurrying out of the shed, had already gone some distance when they realised that Neil wasn't with them.

"I'll get him," urged Lisha "You move on to K. They may be in danger. Really, Neil ought to be more sensible!"

But stepping into the shed again, Lisha took one look at Neil's face and knew that he had found something. Neil was holding a small, round black object like the one Lisha had found in her pocket early on that very day.

"You've found it, Neil?" eagerly she stretched out her hand.

Neil handed the object over to her and nodded. "I think so, Lisha. Anyhow, there's no time to check now. Let's rush to the gates and find out what the others are doing."

Lisha and Neil ran silently with the tape hidden carefully in Lisha's shoe. With already extensive exploration inside the premises, they now had a better idea where the main gates would be. The mist was also much thinner than before, making it easy to spot the house and the domes on the grounds. Nearing the gates, they could see the shadowy figure of Aran at a distance. Further up was K, walking alongside a slim figure (looks like Elena, thought Lisha), followed at some distance by one tall guard robot.

K suddenly turned towards Aran, so that its back was to the guard-robot, and his screen flashed the message: "HAND ME THE WILL! QUICK!"

Aran was well aware that he could not reveal himself in

case the robot spotted him, yet sure that K had very little time to act. With quickening breath, he found two figures approaching him silently in the darkness, one of them making a V sign with his fingers to indicate victory. Lisha took out the tape from her shoe and handed it to Aran. Both brother and sister looked up to Aran for finding a way to hand over the tape to K.

K meanwhile, was talking to Elena, "So! Show me where you have hidden the Will. Immediately!"

Elena was not sure about K's plans, but could guess that the longer she took over discovering the Will, the better it would be for K. As they both stood in front of the guard-house, K continued to talk to her while its screen flashed messages to the children to speed things up.

"Come on, Dr Mikados! We cannot stand here all night. Show me where you have hidden the Will and we'll let you go."

Just as K was talking, a small object rolled along the ground to hit its leg. Seeing no other option, Aran had rolled the tape over to K.

As K leaned down to pick up the tape, the guard-robot came running from behind, shouting and holding out a gun, "What is going on? What are you picking up?"

But K was already in the air, for, quite unknown to Lisha and Neil. Aran had upgraded K to make it an aerial robot, which could fly for quite a distance and was capable of self-navigation. K could also interact with objects on the ground, so that Aran had full faith in it crossing the ocean to find the law firm on the mainland.

Neil and Lisha were jumping with joy, although they dared

not to shout out loud, in case the robot happened to notice them. Dr Elena Mikados was also looking dazed at the turn of events and the guard-robot watched helplessly as K took flight and crossed the main gates. The robot fired at K, but K dodged the shot.

But what was happening? The children watched in disbelief as they saw K slowly coming down towards the ground. Their heart sank as they considered what could have gone wrong. Was there some technical problem? Did the gun actually graze K?

The guard-robot, too, had taken note of K's descent and ran into the guard-house. The children suddenly found the huge gates swinging open as the robot came out of the guard-house and ran outside towards K, pointing the gun at it. As soon as the robot fired, however, K again took flight and soared higher and higher up in the night sky. Aran, in the meantime, grabbed Elena's arm and ran outside the gates with Neil and Lisha. At the sound of footsteps, the robot wheeled around to find clouds of smoke. The children and Elena were hidden in the smoke from the smoke-pellets fired by Neil, who had such useful ammunitions ready at hand for tricks he played on his friends.

Once Dr Mikados' house was well behind them, the children slowed down and helped Elena to sit on a rock by the side of the road. Though fit for her age, she was gasping for breath, and looked tired. Yet a large smile wreathed her face.





"I can't believe I am out at last! I am free!" she said joyously.

"Yes, Elena," said Lisha and hugged her warmly. "And don't worry, your house will also be safe. K is sure to find the lawyers' office and give your Will."

"You found my Will?" Elena was delighted.

"Well, I do hope it was your Will. In the shed outside the flamingoes' cage," said Lisha anxiously.

"Yes, yes, that was the one," replied Elena, relieved. "I wanted to mention the name of the bird, but forgot the name under the pressure to finish the tape before the guard returned. But finding this will really solve a lot of problems."

"Well, Neil found it, actually," said Lisha, giving credit to Neil, and Aran thumped Neil on his back.



"Fantastic, Neil!"

"Hey, what about you? You never told us K could fly?" said Neil, sounding a little huffy.

"Oh, I've been wanting to upgrade K to become a really smart robot for quite some time, you know. But I didn't know so much about aerial robotics. Very recently I got around to getting some help from our robotics teacher and upgraded K. The test-flight was done only a week ago."

"Another point I need clearing up," this time it was Lisha. "If K could fly, why didn't you make K fly on the grounds in the first place?"

"See, at that time we didn't know where the Will was, how Elena could be brought out of the place and so on. So it would have been a great risk to send K off in secret. It was a better bet to send it openly, posing as an official from the Supreme Office."

"That reminds me," Elena said, rising to her feet as they all started out for the hotel. "We must quickly find our way out of this island. The Supreme Office will search for me and will try to make me a prisoner again."

"Oh, yes! We forgot all about that. The Supreme Office is so powerful and their network is everywhere!" Neil looked worried.

"We shouldn't worry about that too much, Elena," assured Aran. "Earlier, the Supreme Office kept its plans under wraps and would have taken your land and property quietly, without anyone knowing that they had actually taken it by unfair means. But now that a lot of things are out in the open, and your will is also on its way to the lawyers, they will probably want to let sleeping dogs lie."

"Besides, you are a scientist respected all over the world. Now that you are free, they will be afraid of your letting the world know the truth about the Supreme Office and their autocratic ways," Lisha pointed out. "I am sure the zoo you have built up for so many years will survive."

"Yes, and all thanks to you," Elena smiled at the children.

"And the mini-zoos in all the state schools?" asked Neil.

"I will make that dream a reality, that's a promise," Elena said solemnly.

"Since when did you become such a champion for birds, Neil?" laughed Lisha.

"Ever since I became friends with flamingoes," came the quick reply.



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